

# Hans Jonas, Transhumanism, and What It Means to Live a «Genuine Human Life»

*Lewis Coyne & Michael Hauskeller*

## Abstract

In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, published in German in 1979 and in English five years later, Hans Jonas introduced a new moral imperative for the technological age that runs as follows: «Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life» (1984, p. 11). This article has two objectives: firstly to clarify what it means to live, in Jonas' sense, a *genuine* human life, and secondly whether we can still live such a life if we radically enhance ourselves the way transhumanists tell us we should. We use two concepts from Jonas' thought to flesh out the notion of genuine humanity – the human condition and the idea of Man – and argue that human enhancement could indeed compromise both: a prospect to be avoided.

## INTRODUCTION: TRANSHUMANISM AND THE ALLEGED THREAT OF DEHUMANISATION

When Hans Jonas died in 1993 transhumanism was still a fringe ideology, promoted only by a few prominent technology enthusiasts who were regarded as visionaries by some, and as cranks by most. Today transhumanism has long since joined the cultural mainstream. It may not be, as Francis Fukuyama famously suggested, «the world's most dangerous idea» (2009), but it has certainly become a highly influential one. The core belief of transhumanism – that we should develop and use technologies that allow us to overcome the human condition, and thereby become something other and, more importantly, *better* than human – is now fiercely defended by a growing number of academic supporters, and has, moreover, very much become the background assumption of many scientific and technological endeavours.

At face value we may well ask: why not? Improvement is almost by definition good and desirable, and few would want to deny that the present state of humanity leaves much to be desired. Exploring possibilities to make us better as a species seems entirely reasonable,

and to oppose such exploration – or simply doubt its wisdom – almost an affront to reason itself.

Its very reasonableness, however, or the appearance thereof, may in fact make transhumanism even *more* dangerous because it tends to conceal, and make difficult to articulate, precisely what is justly concerning about the whole human enhancement project. If there is a danger here it is all but invisible to a utilitarian, progressivist mindset – the very worldview that so dominates Anglophone bioethics. And a danger there is. «Transhumanism's advocates», writes Fukuyama, «think they understand what constitutes a good human being, and they are happy to leave behind the limited, mortal, natural beings they see around them in favor of something better» (*ibid.*). What those who think in this way get wrong, according to Fukuyama, is not so much that they have *false* ideas about what is good and what is bad, but rather that they fail to see how *the good and the bad are interlinked*, how together they form a whole which constitutes our identity as human beings:

Our good characteristics are intimately connected to our bad ones: if we weren't violent and aggressive, we wouldn't be able to defend ourselves; if we didn't have feelings of exclusivity, we wouldn't be loyal to those close to us; if we never felt jealousy, we would also never feel love. Even our mortality plays a critical function in allowing our species as a whole to survive and adapt. (*Ibid.*)

We may not be perfect, but if in order to hold on to the things that we treasure in the human condition we have to put up with all the seemingly harmful bits as well, then instead of trying to rebuild ourselves in the image of the posthuman, it would make more sense to show «humility and respect» (*ibid.*) for the *integrity* of our existing human nature, abandoning the radical human enhancement project and with it the whole transhumanist agenda.

Fukuyama evidently believes that not only is there something precious about being human (which a transhumanist may well agree with), but also that being human entails having all the apparent flaws that transhumanists would like us to be rid of. By radically enhancing ourselves we would run the risk of losing our humanity, and with it something that is too important, too valuable to sacrifice on the altar of technological progress. It is, however, not immediately clear what that something is. For that reason Fukuyama calls it «Factor X» (2002, p. 149), which he defines as that which remains when we strip a person of all their accidental and contingent characteristics (like skin colour, looks, gender, etc.), all of

which are irrelevant for our humanity. What remains is «some essential human quality [...] that is worthy of a certain minimal level of respect» (*ibid.*).

This idea clearly draws on Kant's conceptualisation of dignity, which he defined as an inner and absolute value, meaning that whoever possesses it is not more or less valuable than other things, but *infinitely* valuable. Kant, however, thought that human dignity was rooted in a particular human ability, namely our autonomy: the ability to act purely out of respect for the moral law, or, in other words, our ability to do the right thing for no other reason than that it *is* the right thing. Fukuyama, in contrast, emphasises the holistic nature of human dignity, meaning that there is not one particular property that we owe our dignity to, but rather that the specific interplay of various different human properties makes us what we are. Accordingly «Factor X cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice, or reason, or language, or sociability, or sentience, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality that has been put forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all of these qualities coming together in a human whole that make up Factor X» (p. 171).

Fukuyama's concerns are shared by other critics and sceptics of human enhancement. Because they would prefer to leave the fundamental character of humanity intact, this otherwise heterogeneous group of thinkers are rather disparagingly lumped together as 'bioconservatives'. Perhaps the most prominent such figure is Leon Kass, who explicitly warns of the «intrinsic threat of dehumanization» that the «promise of superhumanization» carries with it (2003, p. 10). But Kass, too, struggles to articulate precisely what it is that is supposedly at risk here. Our worries about superhumanisation, he says, «may have something to do» with what is «natural» or «humanly dignified» or with «the attitude that is properly respectful of what is naturally and dignifiedly human» (p. 17). And like Fukuyama, he suggests that there is «something inherently good or dignified» about the way we are constituted now, and accordingly pleads for a «richer bioethics» that, before anything else, tries to «clarify the human good and aspects of our given humanity that are rightly dear to us, and that biotechnology may serve or threaten» (20). Evidently Kass does not defend an uncritical acceptance, let alone endorsement, of *all* aspects of our being. On the contrary, he allows for the theoretical possibility that there are aspects of our given humanity that are wrongly dear to us, as well as the possibility of a biotechnology that serves those aspects of our given humanity that are rightly dear to us. Ultimately, however, Kass is in agreement with Fukuyama about the need to protect our given being from interventions that would make us, in some normatively relevant way, less human.

In their orientation toward bioethics in general and biotechnology in particular, Fukuyama and Kass are both indebted to Hans Jonas, who insisted that whatever we do with biotechnology, and whatever changes we bring about, these must, in order to be ethically permissible, be «compatible with the permanence of genuine human life» (1984, p. 11).<sup>1</sup> One is immediately struck by the invocation of *genuine* human life, a formulation it is hard to imagine many contemporary ethicists invoking. What does Jonas mean by it? The term implies that there are forms of human life that are *not* genuine, that are perhaps somehow fake in that they only pretend or appear to be forms of human life. There may, in other words, be forms of human life that, in one way or another, *look* human without actually *being* human. This has a certain intuitive plausibility, but in order for it to be true we need to distinguish between aspects of our humanity that are essential to our being human and those that are merely contingent.

Clearly, not *everything* about us is essential to our humanity. Our particular body shape, for example, our size range, and even our exact biological organisation surely have no bearing on it: a being like us except ten feet tall and quadrupedal would surely still count as human in the sense at play here. Equally, it seems implausible to suggest that there is *nothing* essential in our constitution – only a genealogical lineage, so that whatever the beings that we might develop into are like they will be human simply because they are our descendants. The problem with the latter claim is that we could just as well suggest that we are still whatever we were when we were not yet humans, all the way back to the first protozoa, which would make little sense since it would effectively deny the reality of qualitative changes.

How do we then know what makes us what we are, as humans, and what – although it is *in fact* part of what we (currently) are – does not define us in our humanity? And even if we can identify some essential aspects of our being – aspects that make us human, so that any being lacking them (a protozoon for instance, but also, say, anyone who is biologically immortal) is not *genuinely* human – why would we be morally obligated to preserve them?

---

<sup>1</sup> Although Fukuyama does not mention Jonas in any of his single-authored works, he co-authored *Beyond Therapy*, the President's Council on Bioethics' report on biotechnology and human enhancement, which does cite Jonas (2003, p. 311). In Kass' case, by contrast, this debt is explicitly acknowledged (1995); indeed, he even co-dedicated *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity* to Jonas for his «moral passion and philosophical courage» (2002, p. 299). For a comparative account of Kass and Jonas' ethical thought see Vogel (2008).

Evidently the notion of a genuine human life raises plenty of problems – hence, to some, the very suggestion that there is a categorical imperative to preserve it appears almost quaint, the sentiment of a bygone age. But perhaps *this* response is simply an expression of the biases of our own time. Perhaps, in our eagerness to affirm that there is nothing but historical and biological becoming, we overlook what Jonas called «the essential in transience itself» (p. 125). It might just be the case, as Fukuyama supposed, that there is something definitive and of absolute worth in human life as it is now – something that is imperilled by certain technological developments. The present essay uses Jonas' thought as a guide to identifying this something, motivated by the concern that it could be swept away by the biotechnological tide.

#### JONAS' THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY OUTLINED

Jonas' new categorical imperative, demanding that we safeguard the continuity of genuine human life, finds its justification in his theory of responsibility. We will therefore begin by looking in detail at the latter.

Jonas' first premise is that all previous moral systems and norms pertain to acts that are temporally and spatially proximate in their effects. For the interpersonal domain traditional ethics, thus understood, remains adequate, even if we are occasionally required to rethink how its principles are to be applied. The real problem is that modern technology has radically expanded the reach of our action, such that the Earth and the distant future are now subject to its effects, and «since ethics is concerned with action, it should follow that the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics as well» (p. 1). It is this ethical gap that Jonas' imperative is intended to fill. The principal context in which it is developed is the ecological crisis, but Jonas' ethic also pertains to biotechnology and the life sciences, as is clear from the reference in *The Imperative of Responsibility* to an envisioned «applied» (p. 21) sequel dealing with such issues. Jonas' subsequent volume, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik* (*Technology, Medicine, and Ethics*) explicitly fulfils that promise (1985, p. 9), and collects the majority of his essays on bioethical issues. We shall draw on both texts to see what his new categorical imperative can tell us about the desirability or otherwise of the main goal of transhumanism: the radical biotechnological enhancement of future human beings.

Jonas claims that a justification for his imperative «must deal both with the rational ground of obligation [...] and with the psychological ground of its moving the will» (1984, p. 85). It must have, in other words, adequate cognitive and non-cognitive foundations in order to be both binding and compelling. Together these tell us what we should value in human life, so we shall look at them in turn.

The rational argument for the imperative of responsibility broadly proceeds as follows. Jonas holds that «the intrusion of distant future and global scales into our everyday, mundane decisions is an ethical novum which technology has thrust on us; and the ethical category pre-eminently summoned by this novel fact is: *responsibility*» (1982, p. 893). Why responsibility? Because it is a correlate of free action, and so «the claims on responsibility grow proportionately with the deeds of *power*» (*ibid.*). The concept of responsibility accordingly forms the centrepiece of Jonas' ethical response to modern technological developments. He is not preoccupied with the metaphysical question of *whether* we are responsible for our own actions (although he does argue for this); rather, Jonas is chiefly interested in *which beings* we are responsible for: it is a «substantive, goal-committed concept of responsibility» concerning «[t]he well-being, the interest, the fate of others, [which] has, by circumstance or agreement, come under my care» (1984, p. 93).

Clearly, having power over other beings does not alone ground *moral* responsibility for them. Power only becomes a matter for ethics in those cases where a good-in-itself is vulnerable, grounding «the ought-to-do of the subject who [...] is called to its care» (*ibid.*). Although Jonas argues persuasively that all life is such a good, vulnerable according to the limitations of organismic being, for the purposes of the present essay we shall largely restrict our discussion to human beings. The possessions of ends – both psychological and biological – which we know ourselves through immediate reflection to have, necessitates the existence of subjective value, as «with any *de facto* pursued end [...] attainment of it becomes a good, and frustration of it, an evil; and with this distinction the attributability of value begins» (p. 79). In other words, we can be benefitted or harmed through the satisfaction or otherwise of our ends. For some, this interest will be sufficient evidence that humanity is worthy of moral consideration. Jonas goes further, however, and attempts to demonstrate that the existence of such ends is in fact *objectively* good, as this alone would prove that the existence of life, and by extension human beings, truly mattered. To this end he claims as «axiomatic» and grasped «with intuitive certainty» that «the mere *capacity* to *have* any purposes at all [is] a good-in-itself» and «infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being» (p. 80). Regrettably this

appeal to intuition does not amount to the rational grounding Jonas seeks, and nor does his ‘negative proof’: that to deny the value of values would itself, paradoxically, betray a value-preference.<sup>2</sup> As an appeal to intuition, however, it is nevertheless persuasive: a world with subjective values in it does indeed strike us as infinitely superior to a world devoid of such value. We are inclined, therefore, to agree with Jonas that the existence of life in general and human beings in particular represents a good-in-itself, valuable beyond all instrumentality.

Now, we said that a proper object of responsibility must be not only a good-in-itself, but also *vulnerable*, as only then could we be able and compelled to take responsibility for it. In line with his philosophy of biology, Jonas argues that all life is existentially precarious since dependent on the success or failure of its struggles.<sup>3</sup> However, the paradigm case of a vulnerable good is the newborn child. The newborn’s appeal for care, and the parent’s perception of a duty therein, constitute the «timeless archetype of all responsibility» (p. 130) – one «so spontaneous that it needs no invoking of the moral law, [and] is the primordial human case of the coincidence of objective responsibility and the subjective feeling of the same» (p. 90). To perceive an infant in its state of utter vulnerability is to perceive an incontrovertible demand: a call of responsibility, which will remain part of our perception of the child «until the fulfilment of the immanent-teleological promise of eventual self-sufficiency releases [us] from the duty» (p. 134).

Jonas claims that responsibility for the human infant is both the most undisputed example of the phenomenon and also that it is qualitatively exceptional. The reason for the latter claim is as follows. The fact that the parent is responsible for the infant – and not only as it is now, but in accordance with its immanent teleology towards maturity – contains within it a *secondary* responsibility, namely, the infant’s potential for responsibility. Since the child’s maturity, which alone releases us from the duty of care, coincides with it becoming a responsible being, our responsibility is essentially oriented toward the *coming-to-be of another responsible being*. According to Jonas this fact is of cosmic significance:

---

<sup>2</sup> Jonas’ German-language critics, most of whom work in the post-Kantian school of discourse ethics, have been particularly emphatic on this point. See, for instance, Apel (1996), Kuhlmann (1994), and Melle (1998).

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on this point see Becchi and Franzini Tibaldeo (2016).

The appearance of [responsibility] in the world does not simply add another value to the already value-rich landscape of *being* but surpasses all that has gone before with something that generically transcends it. This represents a qualitative intensification of the valuableness of *Being as a whole*, the ultimate object of our responsibility. Thereby [...] the capacity for responsibility as such [...] becomes *its own object* in that having it obligates us to perpetuate *its presence in the world*. (1996, p. 106).

Why, one might ask, is responsibility-for-responsibility, embodied in the parent-child relation, of transcendent importance? Because, Jonas notes, *it represents an obligation to the continued existence of a moral order*. Human beings alone can be good or evil, righteous or wretched, responsible or irresponsible – with this potential even the worst of us represents «the *foothold* for a moral universe in the physical world» (1984, p. 10). Since this entails only the possibility of moral goodness, the ideal of the ethical, «we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future human individuals but to the *idea* of Man, which is such that it demands the presence of its embodiment in the world» (p. 43). As such, Jonas' theory of responsibility is to this extent Kantian: our moral being constitutes «the dignity of [our] essence» (p. 137), and it is this to which the invocation of «genuine human life» in his new categorical imperative refers.

## FEAR FOR THE VULNERABLE GOOD

Jonas' imperative of responsibility for humanity as a moral being first and foremost pertains to the ongoing *existence* of such beings – it does not tell us a great deal about *how* human life ought to be, except that it must have the formal capacity for morality. In previous epochs, perhaps, this would not have posed a problem: the human condition – which, at its most general, means our natality, mortality, and life self-consciously lived between these poles (Arendt H., 1958, p. 8) – was taken as fixed for all time. But today we face the possibility of substantially altering humanity through biotechnology. One might then wonder what Jonas' imperative of responsibility can tell us in that context – there are, after all, few plausible scenarios in which our moral being *as such* would be endangered. To be sure, one can envisage the creation of a stunted form of human life biotechnologically stripped of its capacity to act morally; such beings might even be useful to states in certain military contexts. Alternatively, the biotechnological *enhancement* of morality – which has been described by some enhancement enthusiasts as an «urgent imperative» (Persson I. and



Savulescu J., 2008) – could easily lead to an erosion and even destruction of moral responsibility if the envisaged enhancement aimed at merely ensuring behaviour that conformed with prevalent norms (Hauskeller M., 2017). In destroying the locus of human dignity such an outcome would obviously fall foul of Jonas' categorical imperative, and violate genuine human life even in a single instance. But the vast majority of transhumanist proposals do not involve anything like this – on the contrary, they typically envisage an enhancement of human capacities, physical, psychological, and moral. What can Jonas' imperative reveal as objectionable about this prospect?

The threats to human life that follow from biotechnology are somewhat elusive, requiring reflection and deliberation to identify. It is partly in this connection that Jonas develops what he calls the «heuristics of fear» (1984, p. 21). The purpose of the heuristic is to help us avert, through the spur of concern for the vulnerable good, courses of action in which the existence or essence of human life are threatened. It thereby appeals to a faculty of our psychology – fear – often overlooked by moral philosophers, but which perhaps contains a greater wisdom than the discipline has generally attributed to it. Leon Kass has been much ridiculed for suggesting that repugnance can sometimes be «the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it» (1997, p. 20). A sympathetic interpretation of Kass' claim might be that such spontaneous emotional reactions occasionally have heuristic value in pointing us toward a wrong (Hauskeller M., 2006). We say «occasionally», as even in this capacity repugnance and fears can certainly be misplaced: in such circumstances letting them govern our actions may lead to injustices, and for this reason we might be dubious about the value of fear as a philosophical guide. But *this* response (itself a fear!) would be premature, as misplaced fear represents only a failure of the faculty to find an appropriate object. One might very well note that hope for moral progress is just as frequently misplaced, and yes, just as easily leads us into error. In neither case, however, does this amount to sufficient reason to spurn the faculty in question: what matters is whether the hope for a better world, or fear for a vulnerable good, is appropriate on a case-by-case basis.

Where humanity's bare existence or its basic capacity for morality are threatened the nature of the threats are clear, and our fears well grounded: the new categorical imperative here aligns with our non-cognitive judgement. But in other cases where the vulnerable good is imperilled by biotechnology, the fear *itself* helps us to identify and better understand precisely what is at stake. As Jonas says: «we need the threat to the image of man – and

rather specific kinds of threat – to assure ourselves of his true image by the very recoil from these threats» (1984, p. 26-27). At first this might sound circular, presupposing that which is subsequently discovered: as though we are to imagine a threat to genuine human life, but only through our fearful response to that threat do we identify genuine human life. However, whilst Jonas admits that his argument has an air of paradox about it, it is not, in fact, circular in the sense just given. What Jonas means is this: the *demands* made of us by human dignity – following, we recall, from our status as moral beings – only reveal themselves when we perceive a violation of that dignity. It is in *this* sense that we discover genuine human life in its ‘fullness’, and hence come to *«know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake»* (p. 27). This is the peculiar wisdom of fear: it encourages us to see anew the good that might be lost.

A little more has to be said in justification of this claim. Human dignity functions in this oblique way because dignity in general cannot be comprehensively described independently of circumstances. It is not an object separable from its context, but a status, denoting both the moral significance of a being and the particular ways in which one can and cannot treat it. While this status can be abstractly accounted for, as in Jonas’ theory of responsibility, the demands it makes of us can only be discovered contextually. The problem at hand is precisely that the context informing what dignity demands of us is rapidly changing. Historically, the stable temporal and spatial reach of our actions ensured that norms governing inter-personal relations remained sufficient. Today, of course, emerging technologies and novel scientific practices provide us with unprecedented ways of acting upon fellow human beings. In order to know what we must not do, we have to draw on observation, and imagination guided by fear, to discover which violate our dignity.

In Jonas’ thought there are two different types of dignity: human dignity, which follows from being a moral agent – a person in Kant’s sense – and the non-personal «dignity of ends» (p. 8). This division reflects the history of the concept: the former corresponds to the notion of *dignitas*, and the latter to *bonitas*, terms which over time converged and became the single concept we know today as dignity. Now, according to Jonas’ philosophical biology all organisms are defined by immanent teleology (Coyne L., 2017). That is to say, all living beings have ends both in their biological constitution and their activity, and thereby possess

non-personal dignity. Human beings alone, of course, also possess personal, human dignity.<sup>4</sup> However, we can only come to know what either type of dignity *morally* entails when it is violated, either in reality or the imagination. A brief thought experiment will suffice to show how this works as a general method. If we perceive an organism which is prevented from living according to its immanent *telos* – keeping a bird caged, for example – the perception of the fact is given inseparably with that of its violated dignity: this bird before us is not being treated in the way it *ought* to be. Even if the bird in question does not demonstrate any physical or emotional discomfort – perhaps the cage is all it has ever known, meaning it does not long to fly – the sense of violation prevails. Indeed, in one sense the violation is greater still if the bird does not mind that it cannot behave and fly: we would then have established total domination over it.

The violation of a being's non-personal dignity does not, however, represent a categorically impermissible harm. After all, we must perpetually commit violations of this kind in order to live, both in the consumption of other living beings and in self-defence against human and non-human threats. If these acts remain wrong, which may well be the case, then wrongdoing is simply a tragic necessity of life (which is by no means an argument against non-personal dignity, or biocentric ethics more broadly). As Jonas says, following Albert Schweitzer, «we make ourselves guilty by insisting on being here» (2012, p. 24). The challenge for practical reason is to minimise such guilt by carefully distinguishing between the necessary and unnecessary violations of non-personal dignity. Making such judgements tends to be an imprecise art, as we can only do so by weighing principles against consequences and virtues: potentially conflicting moral registers. In the bioethical domain, the majority of cases are to be adjudicated in this way: we cannot often prescribe «a simple “yes” or “no” [...]; instead, we find an area of fluid boundaries, subtle value judgments, and controversial decisions» (1996: 50). To alter the human condition – which is tied to our teleological constitution and thus our non-personal dignity – can therefore only be objected to for reasons of varying degrees of strength. But through the heuristic of fear we might

---

<sup>4</sup> Confusion can arise when «human dignity» is invoked, as it is often unclear whether the appeal being made is to personal dignity alone or to both personal and non-personal dignity at once – i.e., to the kind of dignity belonging *exclusively* to humans, or to the kinds of dignity that humans possess. For the sake of clarity we will use «human dignity» in the former sense, to mean the dignity possessed exclusively by humans.

discover compelling reasons to not biotechnologically violate it. And, as stated, courtesy of Jonas' new categorical imperative and the responsibility it entails for the essence of humanity as a moral being, we may draw some stronger conclusions regarding *human* dignity. Wherever *this* sort of dignity is violated we risk genuine human life.

## HUMAN BEINGS AS MEANS

The first situation, relevant to our discussion, in which Jonas argues that human dignity can be violated is experimental research. Transhumanism typically promises enhancement through either pharmacological means or those of genetic engineering. Either method, if used for research purposes on unwitting or unwilling human subjects, entails a categorically impermissible instrumentalisation of human beings: the use of our physical or mental selves as a source of data «must be absolutely free» (1980, p. 111). In the bioethical literature this is typically characterised as giving one's informed consent to be used in research, and widely taken as a basic ethical requirement. But even informed consent, if left unsubstantiated, is insufficient (1978, p. 260-261). For example, if impoverished persons partook in medical research simply because they needed the financial compensation we would regard this as taking advantage of the vulnerable. In order to avoid such exploitation in the recruitment of research participants, thereby ensuring that informed consent is *truly* free, we require some robust criteria. To this end Jonas suggests that we prioritise, and progressively work down from, those volunteers who simultaneously a) least need remuneration, b) have the best understanding of the experiment and the risks involved, and c) most believe in, or identify with, the purpose of the research (1980, p. 123).

Despite its almost universal acceptance, certain transhumanists have questioned the ethical necessity of informed consent. Rather implausibly, Steven Fuller and Veronika Lipinska have argued that since consent can get in the way of scientific progress then if the latter requires it people should be forced to take part in experiments, even those that are extremely risky (2014, p. 38). Why do we find this prospect so objectionable? Because in return for mere instrumental gains our *human dignity* is violated. Truly free informed consent is a minimum requirement not just because it implies less harm to feed into a hedonic calculus (although this is clearly part of its importance). It matters above all because *making the uncoerced decision* to partake in the research upholds our status as moral agents, true to the beings that we are. In a Kantian vernacular, we might say that by consenting in this way

participants remain ends while also being used as means; without doing so they are simply instrumentalised as a source of data. Making this very point, Jonas claims that «[o]nly genuine authenticity of volunteering can possibly redeem the condition of “thinghood” to which the subject submits» in an experimental situation (1980, p. 109). We have here, then, an example of how moral demands emerge from a concrete situation: in experimental situations human dignity is violated if we are treated as things rather than persons, revealing the necessity of truly free informed consent.<sup>5</sup>

The second circumstance in which the transhumanist agenda could come into conflict with human dignity is in the enhancement of one person (or persons) for the sake of another. The reason is the same as the above: individuals would thereby be treated as means for others' ends. Here the possibility of eugenics – the improvement of the national stock by the state – rears its ugly head. To be sure, most transhumanists do not argue for a state-sponsored or mandated form of enhancement – a recent exception being Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson's advocacy of compulsory moral enhancement (2008, p. 174), which they subsequently dropped in favour of a voluntary programme. Enhancement is most often envisaged as either something done to oneself or chosen by parents for their children. The former cannot violate human dignity, provided it is an uncoerced decision, since the free choice is sufficient to make instrumentalisation of oneself permissible (which does not mean, of course, that it is therefore wise or desirable – it may turn out to be neither). The latter case would, however, violate human dignity if the parents chose to enhance their future children to benefit *themselves* (or a third party) on the grounds, perhaps, that the child's predicted successes would benefit or reflect well on them. In such cases the instrumentalisation of human beings would differ only in scale from a state-sponsored enhancement programme, and remain equally impermissible.

## THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

As the above cases involve instrumentalisation of human beings, violating our human dignity and thereby contravening genuine human life, Jonas's imperative of responsibility generates categorical objections to them. He also, however, provided persuasive arguments against altering the human condition. Humans, unlike other species, have an awareness of our own

---

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of the foregoing arguments see Schafer (1983).

being – we are the being whose being is an issue for ourselves (Heidegger M., 2010) – and live against this shared backdrop regardless of historical or cultural circumstances: we know we are born rather than made, that we will one day die, and that each of our lives shares this givenness. Since this pertains to our organismic constitution, rather than our moral being, alterations made to the human condition violate only our non-personal dignity. To repeat, such violations are not categorically objectionable, and may be outweighed by other concerns. But should our worries about violations of non-personal dignity prove persuasive we would have reasons to abide by the human condition. To illustrate this we shall take the example of immortality: perhaps the most radical aspect of the transhumanist dream.

The basic transhumanist justification for immortality is that the pleasurable experiences life grants us would remain qualitatively the same (or even improve if we are cognitively enhanced), yet increase quantitatively. At first this may appear plausible, but what it overlooks is the value of natality and mortality in giving structure and meaning to human existence, and which most clearly reveal themselves to us when we contemplate their abolition. We can take firstly the fact that we are born, and ask what significance our natality, that «perennial spring» (1984, p. 19), has for us. Jonas suspects that «if we abolish death, we must abolish procreation as well, for the latter is life's answer to the former» (*ibid.*). This is not just an ecological concern, to do with the mere fact of insufficient resources and living space on an already overcrowded planet (1996, p. 96). Although a pertinent objection, the transhumanist can always invoke a utopian solution in response: that if we have mastered death we would surely be able to solve such logistical issues, presumably by uploading our minds to cyberspace. Jonas' worry is also that the desire to procreate – beyond the sexual impulse – is motivated, in part, by a concern for immortality in the *classical* sense: to leave a mark on the world through one's descendants. The realisation of transhumanist immortality may well diminish the desire for classical immortality through procreation, and thereby result in a drastic reduction of births.

Of course, the transhumanist may see no problem with this, and argue that if human lives continue in perpetuity then it does not matter whether it is old or new. But Jonas suggests that it *does* matter, in terms of the constitution of society and the effects it would have on our collective life: «we would have a world of old age with no youth, and of known individuals with no surprises» (1984, p. 19). He continues:

[Natality] grants us the eternally renewed promise of the freshness, immediacy, and eagerness of youth, together with the supply of otherness as such. There is no substitute for this in the greater accumulation of prolonged experience: it can never recapture the unique privilege of seeing the world for the first time and with new eyes; never relive the wonder which, according to Plato, is the beginning of philosophy. (*Ibid.*)

Conversely, were a wellspring of youth *and* immortal beings to exist concurrently, the result could be an ever-greater estrangement of the old from the young, the former stranded in a world they no longer understand – «walking anachronisms who have outlived themselves» (1996, p. 98). In both cases the loss pertains to our *collective* life: either a social body with no novelty, youth, and freshness, or else a society in which the old are increasingly alienated from the young.

At the opposite end of our temporal existence is the pole of mortality: the fact that we must die and *know* that we must do so. Jonas argues that the eradication of this boundary could have negative effects for each individual, as knowledge of our eventual deaths plays a fundamental role in giving meaning and weight to our lives (1984, p. 19). The reason is that our finitude is a presupposition to our making meaningful decisions – and, as the existentialists taught us, our choices inform who we are. Of course, the scope of choice is delimited by factors beyond our control, but to the extent that our lives are undetermined we have before us a range of possibilities: if we are very lucky we can choose where to live, which job to take, whether to have children, and so on. On a more everyday level we can make choices ranging from how we treat others to which hobbies to pursue. We might choose to spend our time learning to play the piano rather than travelling, seeing our families, or helping in the community. The fact that this choice is delimited by the duration of our lifespan is precisely what gives the decision weight, as we must choose to allocate the cherished time we have in one way and not the others. An immortal, however, could eventually do anything and everything, and rather than this being liberating, as the transhumanists naïvely suppose, it could in fact sap actions of their meaning: if one cannot die, an infinity of options are open to us and thus no longer have the weight we presently experience in them *as choices*. In other words, the quantitative gain could come at a qualitative cost, the abolition of mortality amounting to a form of existential denigration. As

Jonas notes, paraphrasing Psalm 90, «[p]erhaps a nonnegotiable limit to our expected time is necessary for each of us as the incentive to number our days and make them count» (*ibid.*).<sup>6</sup>

The foregoing reflections on the value of the human condition only refer to our lifespan – they do not encompass the other physical or psychological aspects of our organismic being that transhumanists hope to enhance (for an example of complementary arguments pertaining to these dimensions see Skidelsky E., 2018). Nevertheless, it demonstrates how Jonas' heuristic of fear can be put to work and what it accomplishes. Our natality and mortality, the former so often overlooked and the latter so frequently derided throughout history, in fact reveal themselves to be of great significance for the quality of our lives. With this observation we return to our guiding theme.

## GENUINE HUMAN LIFE

We stressed earlier on that those biotechnological enhancements which violated our human dignity threatened what Jonas called the idea of Man, or, in his categorical imperative, «genuine human life». By contrast, those enhancements that violated only our non-personal dignity could not threaten the genuine human life invoked. Why? Because only the former violations pertain to our *moral* being, whereas the latter pertain to our *organismic* being, underpinning what we have called the human condition. The result is a conception of genuine human life that is strangely narrow, all the more so since across Jonas' bioethical writings he raised a variety of pertinent objections to genetic engineering as a means and human enhancement as an end. To take one such example, not yet discussed, Jonas argues that our existential and political freedoms would likely be undermined by genetic engineering (1980, p. 161-165), which could even hold, in some circumstances, if this were a self-chosen enhancement (Coyne L., 2018). Nevertheless this would only be a violation of non-personal dignity rather than a categorically impermissible violation of human dignity, and the same is

---

<sup>6</sup> Jonas always hoped that his philosophical thought would stand on its own two feet, independently of any religious arguments, which he confined to his theological writings. At times, however – as the reference to Psalm 90 indicates – he drew on theological notions for rhetorical purposes, most notably, perhaps, when employing the *imago Dei* as a synonym for the idea of Man (1984, p. 140). For a criticism of this feature of Jonas' thought see Hottois (1993, p. 14).



true of the arguments against immortality provided above. As such, we are denied the fuller account of genuine human life which Jonas' thought seemed to provide us with.

Therefore a division between two concepts, used synonymously in Jonas' ethical theory, might be in order. On the one side we can place the 'idea of Man', and on the other 'genuine human life'. The rationale for doing so is as follows. The idea of Man follows from our moral being: it is the ever-present possibility for goodness that each human being, as a moral agent, represents. This is the quality which Jonas' imperative claims we are categorically obligated to preserve, and also forms the grounds of our human dignity. But this is not all that is worth protecting in human life, as the heuristic of fear reveals. The human condition – rooted in our organismic being and thereby connected to our non-personal dignity – also reveals its value when we consider its abolition or transformation. Taken together, then, the idea of Man and the human condition might be said to constitute a *genuine human life*. This phrase would have to be detached from Jonas' imperative, of course, and replaced with the idea of Man, since non-personal dignity can make no claims to categorical preservation. But what this move allows us to do is provide a richer account of genuine human life, one that comprises the moral *and* organismic aspects of our being, and although the former is of greater worth, the latter still has a profound significance for us. To alter our status as beings that are born rather than made, and live in the knowledge of our shared finitude, would come at a price arguably not worth paying.

In this way Jonas' thought can be construed as an alternative, or perhaps accompaniment, to Kass and Fukuyama's comparable arguments. It would unite Fukuyama's concern that transhumanism threatens our human dignity (which he had referred to as 'Factor X') and Kass' worry that it might threaten something valuable associated with what is natural. In Jonas' vocabulary this is to say that transhumanism imperils, in some circumstances, the idea of Man as a moral being, while in other circumstances it threatens the value of the human condition. Where it does so, revealing to us the significance of both, we can determine what constitutes a genuine human life.

Dr Lewis COYNE  
University of Exeter  
Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive  
Exeter EX4 4RJ

United Kingdom

Prof. Michael HAUSKELLER  
University of Liverpool  
Department of Philosophy  
Mulberry Court, Mulberry Street  
Liverpool L69 7ZY  
United Kingdom

## Bibliography

APEL, Karl-Otto (1996). *Selected Essays, Vol. 2: Ethics and the Theory of Rationality*. Trans. by W. BROWN, New Jersey: Humanities Press.

ARENDT, Hannah (1958). *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

BECCHI, Paolo – FRANZINI TIBALDEO, Roberto (2016). «The Vulnerability of Life in the Philosophy of Hans Jonas», *Human Dignity of the Vulnerable in the Age of Rights: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. by A. MASFERRER and E. GARCIA-SÁNCHEZ, Cham, Springer, 2016, p. 81-120.

COYNE, Lewis (2017). «Phenomenology and Teleology: Hans Jonas's Philosophy of Life», *Environmental Values*, 26/3 (2017), p. 297-315.

COYNE, Lewis (2018). «An Unfit Future: Moral Enhancement and Technological Harm», *Moral Enhancement: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. by Michael HAUSKELLER and Lewis COYNE, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 351-370.

FUKUYAMA, Francis (2002). *Our Posthuman Future*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

FUKUYAMA, Francis (2009). «Transhumanism», *Foreign Policy*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October.

FULLER, Steven – LIPINSKA, Veronika (2014). *The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

HAUSKELLER, Michael (2006). «Moral Disgust», *Ethical Perspectives*, 13/4 (2006), p. 571-602.

HAUSKELLER, Michael (2017). «Is It Desirable to be Able to Do the Undesirable?», *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 26/3 (2017), p. 365-376.

HEIDEGGER, Martin (2010). *Being and Time*. Trans. by J. STAMBAUGH and D. J. SCHMIDT, Albany, State University of New York Press.

HOTTOIS, Gilbert (1993). «Introduction», *Aux Fondements D'une Éthique Contemporaine: H. Jonas et H.T. Engelhardt*. Ed. by Gilbert HOTTOIS, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1993, p. 11-31.

JONAS, Hans (1978). «Straddling the Boundaries of Theory and Practice: Recombinant DNA Research as a Case of Action in the Process of Inquiry», *Recombinant DNA: Science, Ethics, and Politics*. Ed. by J. RICHARDS, New York, Academic Press, 1978, p. 253-271.

JONAS, Hans (1980). *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, New York, Atropos Press.

JONAS, Hans (1982). «Technology as a Subject for Ethics», *Social Research*, 49/4 (1982), p. 891-898.

JONAS, Hans (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Trans. by Hans JONAS and David HERR, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

JONAS, Hans (1985). *Technik, Medizin und Ethik: Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

JONAS, Hans (1996). *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*, Illinois, Northwestern University Press.

JONAS, Hans (2012). «On Suffering», *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 78/1-2 (2012), p. 22-30.

KASS, Leon R. (1995). «Appreciating *The Phenomenon of Life*», *Hastings Center Report* 25/7 (1995), p. 3-12.

KASS, Leon R. (1997). «The Wisdom of Repugnance», *The New Republic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, p. 17-26.

KASS, Leon R. (2002). *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, San Francisco, Encounter Books.

KASS, Leon R. (2003). «Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Perfection», *The New Atlantis*, Spring, p. 9-28.

KUHLMANN, Wolfgang (1994). «“Prinzip Verantwortung” versus Diskursethik», *Ethik für die Zukunft: Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*. Ed. by Dietrich BÖHLER, Frankfurt am Main: C. H. Beck, 1994, p. 277-302.

Formatted: German (Germany)

MELLE, Ulrich (1998). «Responsibility and the Crisis of Technological Civilisation: A Husserlian Meditation on Hans Jonas», *Human Studies*, 21/4 (1998), p. 329-345.

PERSSON, Ingmar – SAVULESCU, Julian (2008). «The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity», *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 25/3 (2008), p. 162-177.

SCHAFER, Arthur (1983). «Experimentation with Human Subjects: A Critique of the Views of Hans Jonas», *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 9/2 (1983), p. 76-79.

SKIDELSKY, Edward (2018). «Moral Enhancement and the Human Condition», *Moral Enhancement: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. by Michael HAUSKELLER and Lewis COYNE, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 109-120.

THE PRESIDENT’S COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS (2003). *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, New York: Harper Perennial.

VOGEL, Lawrence (2008). «Natural-Law Judaism? The Genesis of Bioethics in Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Leon Kass», *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*. Ed. by Hava TIROSH-SAMUELSON and Christian WIESE, Leiden: Brill, 2008, p. 287-314.